

Testimony of Andy Knott
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Joint House Committee Meeting
Great Lakes and Environment
Rep. Rebekah Warren, Chair, and
Environmental Quality of the Standing Committee on Appropriations
Rep. Doug Bennett, Chair
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The Grand Traverse Bay Watershed covers approximately 976 square miles in the northwestern Lower Michigan, touching six counties and including Traverse City. The watershed includes nine major drainage basins: Elk River- Chain of Lakes, Boardman River, Mitchell Creek, Acme Creek, Ptobego Creek, Yuba Creek, Old Mission Peninsula, East Bay shoreline and tributaries and West Bay shoreline and tributaries. Of the land area within the watershed, 126 square miles, or 12.6 percent, is wetlands. This region is home to more than 110,000 Michiganders.

These wetlands play a critical role by protecting our water quality, providing flood protection, sustaining fish and wildlife, and providing recreational opportunities in our economy. The Traverse City region's economy relies heavily on water-based recreation and tourism. Our region must have the best wetland protection program possible to protect our water resources, our economy, our property values, and our quality of life. In her February 2009 State of the State address, Governor Granholm proposed returning wetland protection enforcement to the federal government. It is our position that shifting wetland protections to the federal government will not provide adequate protection for Michigan's wetlands and the proposal should be rejected.

Michigan's wetlands statute protects isolated wetlands over 5 acres in size, a protection not present in the federal legislation. In fact, some 900,000 acres of wetlands forming headwaters of streams in the interior of Michigan, including parts of the Grand Traverse Bay watershed, would not be regulated if enforcement were returned to the federal government. Furthermore, the field staff for the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) are more familiar with the natural resources in their districts and better able to work with applicants to avoid adverse impacts to wetlands.

Maintaining a strong state wetlands program is central to transitioning the state to a "blue economy", as laid out in the MI-Great Lakes Plan, announced by Lt. Governor Cherry on February 4, 2009, just days before the State of the State address. The plan specifically calls for strong financial commitments from the state and the federal government to protecting our water resources, particularly wetlands. The plan notes that Michigan has lost almost half of its original wetlands, and that these losses have had direct impacts on human health, economic vitality and sustainability, and regional prosperity.¹ The plan specifically states that continuation of funding for the wetlands program is "essential" and that the state should seek federal assistance with funding to keep the wetland program within DEQ.²

It appears that the main argument in favor of this proposal is cost savings to the state. The cost of Michigan's wetlands program is approximately \$4 million of which \$2.1 million comes from the state's general fund. This is a small price to pay for the services that wetlands provide to our communities, in terms of flood protection, sediment control, water quality maintenance, groundwater recharge, and fish and wildlife habitat. The costs to our communities -- flood damage, water treatment, erosion, and lost recreational activities -- as a result of inadequate wetland protection stemming from this proposal far outweigh the \$2 million budgeted for the state program.

For example, wetlands are part of our natural infrastructure that helps manage stormwater in communities throughout the state. The cost estimates for building engineered stormwater management structures range from \$500 to \$10,000 per acre.³ An analysis conducted for the City of Garland, Texas, estimated the cost of building stormwater management retention structures at \$2.8 million per year if natural systems were not protected.⁴ Ecosystem services studies conducted by American Forests of more than 40 communities around the country show that "impervious surfaces have increased by 20 percent over the past 2 decades in urban areas at a cost in excess of \$100 billion nationally."⁵

The same arguments can be made about drinking water supply, as wetlands assist in cleansing our drinking water by helping to remove nutrients and sediments. Providing insufficient protections for wetlands will only increase the costs to communities of providing clean drinking water. As a result, cutting funding to the state wetland protection program will simply shift the costs to local governments who will be burdened with trying to manage increasing levels of stormwater and declining drinking water quality.

Wetlands in the Grand Traverse Bay watershed are a vital part of our communities natural infrastructure. They perform essential ecosystem services in a more cost-effective manner than built structures. They are also an essential part of our economic development by supporting our water-based tourism and recreation. We need the strongest wetland protection program possible, and that means maintaining and supporting the state wetland program at the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Andy Knott
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¹MI -- Great Lakes Plan: Our Path to Protect, Restore, and Retain Michigan's Natural Treasures, Michigan Department of Environmental Quality, Office of the Great Lakes, January 2009 at 28.

²Id. At 30, 35.

³S. Wenger and L. Fowler, Protecting Stream and River Corridors: Creating Effective Local Riparian Buffer Ordinances, Public Policy Research Series, Carl Vinson Institute for Government, University of Georgia at 49.

⁴Local Ecosystem Analysis, Garland, Texas: Calculating the Value of Nature, American Forests, April 2000 at 2, 6.

⁵See American Forests website at www.americanforests.org, and select "Urban Forest Ecosystems," and then "Trees and Ecosystem Services."